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AUTHOR Hieke, Adolf E.
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ABSTRACT

Language laboratories are especially neglected at the intermediate and advanced levels of foreign language learning. Teachers fail to avail themselves of an important teaching tool at a critical point, when the more mechanical aspects of assimilating the target language should give way to gaining an actual communicative competence in it. At the higher levels, the potential of the lab has never been fully developed. A number of ways are suggested in which crucial classroom time can be increased by relegating the more routine activities as well as those not necessitating 'live' teacher presence to the lab. A number of such activities are listed and procedures given to put a plan for integrating the lab into operation. It is demonstrated how any classroom teacher or school system can adopt such an approach at the intermediate and advanced levels without great time expenditures, highly technical know-how in preparing tapes, or substantially increased funds, even if no full professional language laboratory is on the premises. (Author/CFM)

Integrative Uses Of the Language Lab For Intermediate And Advanced Students

Adolf E. Hieke
University of Tuebingen
University of Kansas

Abstract

Language laboratories stand empty much of the time. Especially at the intermediate and advanced levels of FL learning, the use of the lab dwindles to nothing. Thus teachers fail to avail themselves of an important teaching tool at a critical point, when the more mechanical aspects of assimilating the target language should give way to gaining an actual communicative competence in it. At the higher levels, the potential of the lab has really never been fully exploited. This paper suggests a number of ways in which crucial classroom time can be increased by relegating the more routine activities as well as those not necessitating 'live' teacher presence to the lab. It suggests and lists a number of such activities, provides procedures to put a plan for integrating the lab into operation, and demonstrates how any classroom teacher or school system can adopt such an approach at the intermediate and advanced levels. This can be done without forbidding time expenditures, highly technical know-how in preparing tapes, or substantially increased funds, even if no full professional language laboratory is on the premises.

Language laboratories are the most expensively equipped rooms in our schools, and yet they stand empty much of the time. While foreign language programs at the beginning levels commonly offer laboratory practice in conjunction with classwork because publishers provide tape libraries with their textbooks, it is at the intermediate and advanced levels where the use of the lab dwindles to nothing. Thus teachers fail to avail themselves of an important teaching tool at a very critical time in foreign language learning, when the more mechanical aspects of assimilating the target language should give way to gaining an actual communicative competence in that language.

This paper suggests a number of ways in which crucial classroom time can be increased by relegating the more routine activities, or those which do not necessitate 'live' teacher presence, to the lab. It suggests and lists such activities, provides procedures to put a plan for integrating the lab into operation, and demonstrates how any class-

room teacher or school system can adopt such an approach at the intermediate and advanced levels. without forbidding time expenditures or highly technical know-how in the way of preparing tapes.

It is unfortunate that we have deloped a sort of tunnel-vision over the years about what constitutes the proper role and function of the lab. This can be attributed directly to the kind of thinking prevalent in the operant conditioning school of learning, exemplified most prominently by the audio-lingual method. In that view, the role of the lab lies mainly in strengthening habits first formed in class and revolves around a host of structure drills and pattern practice. All of these are ultimately rendered in some form of the stimulus-response-reinforcement frame (Fries 1945; Brooks, Lado, Rivers 1964; Jakobovits 1970). As well-reasoned as such a framework may be for the lower stages of learning, it is so restrictive by nature that the greater the student's competence, the smaller, in an inverse ratio, becomes the use of the lab. Since the lab does not lend itself to anything even approaching 'free conversation', its usefulness radically diminishes. It is at this very stage that we have

failed to capitalize on the learner's newly-gained competence in the target language. From this point on he could be entrusted with new responsibilities and more sophisticated lab activities, precisely because he is now ready for a greater measure of independence from the constant, tight control of monitoring his every utterance. In essence, then, whatever the teacher would do in class that does not require constant interaction with the class on his part (where he has to interject his guiding presence every few moments), that portion of his teaching could be transferred to a laboratory atmosphere. If he can work out the mechanics to remain within the limitations of the lab, he is justified in doing just that. As a result, a considerable percentage of the work now conducted in class could be relegated to the lab without infringement on the learning process. As the examples below will make evident, in most cases a surprisingly small amount of adjustment is necessary.

Using the lab so that it becomes integrated with and a part of regular classroom practices has the tandem effect of buying time for both teacher and student. Any class time thus freed can be devoted to leading the learner from a mechanical to

a functional use of language. This should be a paramount goal, but usually there is little or no time left for it in practice. The lab buys time for the student in a different respect: it can do a lot of things the teacher cannot do in class. There the teacher must divide every hour among all of his students and they, in addition, have to share his attention with all other classmates; but in the lab, the learner can have a full hour of the teacher to himself. He can stop him or make him repeat, in short he can make the teacher adjust to the pace most comfortable to the individual. As a result, the student receives more individualized instruction in spite of the fact that the teacher cannot respond to him personally.

It would go beyond the present purpose to discuss the opportunities and limitations of the lab per se; such matters are covered in depth elsewhere (Stack 1960; Morton 1961; Hocking 1964; Dakin 1973). At issue here are those activities which might just as well be relegated to the lab. Among these, there are first some rather passive ones without the need for frequent intervals of active participation since no oral production need be involved: dictation, listening comprehension, note-taking skills and the

like. Then there is a large area of activities where the student is actively involved in responding to the taped lesson in either oral or written form. The entire realm of testing in its various forms belongs here since written work can be accomplished successfully by following oral cues and directions. Handouts, worksheets, exercise or answer sheets can accompany such work in the lab just as formerly in class. Although special care in constructing oral versions of tests and their corresponding worksheets is necessary, practically anything that can be tested in class can equally be tested in the lab (cf. Harris 1969; Clark 1972; Allen 1977). A further set of activities which require the transformation and production of material in some new form would include paraphrasing, comprehension of readings, aural or listening comprehension (such as understanding and following complex instructions), and exercises utilizing programmed instruction techniques (such as supplementary materials for common trouble spots or specialized materials for complex and difficult topics).

In line with shifting more responsibility onto the student at this level, the learner should be

given more frequent opportunity to correct his own work on hand of a model. Thus the correct version of an earlier translation, together with comments, alternately rendered passages as well as the teacher's explanations and justifications, can form the basis for correcting and rewriting materials as the learner's responsibility. A point made orally somehow contains an explanatory power more immediate than in the form of a written statement, so that a lot of activities of this kind could be handled at least as successfully in an oral, taped fashion. It would also be feasible, for example, to provide the detailed explanations or elaborations that are necessary for longer projects or substantial work assignments out of class. The oral medium is suitable for that sort of thing since, in the end, these instructions are all purely mechanical and rather time-consuming, especially when they need to be repeated. There is no reason why an instructor cannot convey this type of information on tape as effectively as in class. Naturally there will be questions regardless of the mode; class time will have to be set aside for that in any event. Yet students have a chance to reflect on information that is taped, they can replay the instructions for confirmation and can then phrase

their remaining questions precisely. Another opportunity to provide more individualized instruction involves the grading of compositions via tape. On the basis of the teacher's taped discussion of the student paper--comments which can be more cogent and full than the narrow margins on paper would allow--the student makes his corrections. He is also more animated to think through his work more carefully for a second time since he cannot use shortcuts and benefit from the markings on his paper, for there are none (cf. Farnsworth 1974).

Without doubt the list of activities presented above could be extended by each individual teacher as he goes through his own classroom practices. Once the whole concept of integrating the lab into classroom teaching has become accepted, new applications will suggest themselves all the time. But it can be seen already that a considerable amount of time can be conserved in the suggested manner. It will also become evident that there are certain advantages to having taped versions of some teaching units. Not only do they serve as a permanent library for future use, but they are potentially of higher quality than a life performance. The teacher can prepare and present his material with care, can keep

close control over time, and does not have to cope with the interference and distraction he often faces in class. The oral mode, furthermore, incorporates and thus tests an additional dimension of linguistic competence. This in turn permits the learner to experience the target language in actual use as a communicative tool, not just as something one has knowledge about. The teacher can also be assured that the material will arrive in a democratic fashion free of such factors as interference or seating arrangement and so forth. The individual booths which are commonly installed in labs insure a private atmosphere (especially conducive to testing), and yet written records and tests can be maintained as before.

It should be pointed out emphatically that in all the foregoing there is no need to adopt a whole new outlook on preparing materials, to change one's familiar method of teaching or even method of testing just to make the lab workable. With the least bit of imagination the existing materials and teaching modes can be modified to fit an oral presentation and the more precise and elaborate instructions on tape, and so can the accompanying handouts etc. The only significant adjustment will come in the change of atti-

tude that teachers and students alike must take on toward the lab. The lab is to be considered an important extension of the classroom and, indeed, an integral part of it. Regular lab attendance must be thought a natural part of class attendance, especially since much significant work is conducted in the lab--and nowhere else.

So far, then, the arguments speak for an integration of the lab into class as a vital aspect of foreign language learning, given the willingness of the teaching staff to overcome their reluctance to integrate machines into their schedule, and given some limited additional expenditure in time and money. There are other practical considerations as well, and the remainder of this paper will be concerned with such more pragmatic problems.

In the foregoing, the existence of an operational lab for language programs at a school has been presumed. But that does not mean that almost the same effect cannot be achieved with one or more reel-to-reel or cassette recorders placed in some quiet corner of the building. Perhaps we teachers have really underestimated the revolution in sound

reproduction devices which are just waiting for us to be tapped. In many households, our students have ready access to cassette recorders, so that by means of check-out cassettes at school the function of the lab can be extended to the home. And the frequency range of the human voice is such that even the most inexpensive machines adequately transmit the significant sound features of language. It is therefore no longer imperative to take a fully equipped language lab for granted in order to provide regular lab work to one's classes.

Initially, the entire fiscal aspect may present another obstacle, although that is actually minor. If we consider the wasted investment in unused lab facilities whose intended purpose it is to serve as an educational resource, a limited additional outlay is justified if by that we achieve what we want. We would succumb to a non-argument if we fail in this because there seem to be no ready funds available for tapes and some part-time lab proctors. There has to be a supply of tapes, and regular lab hours are essential to allow students access to the lab at different times of the day or week. That involves someone who can run the master controls, who can check out tapes and who is able

to maintain order. Anyone can be trained to be a lab proctor, since no professional qualifications in the target language or languages are necessary. All instructions to be followed are self-contained and complete on the tape itself. At most, the proctor must give out and collect sheets of paper which are coordinated with the tapes and must time exams when they are given to a class in the lab. It is, of course, possible to envision cooperative efforts where senior students or part-time staff take turns in manning the lab in order to get the project started. There is always a way and success depends only on the initiative of the teachers interested enough in seeing the system function.

Another objection to the realization of the kind of program outlined here can also be put to rest. An axiomatic requirement for lab materials usually calls for providing the students with a competent model to copy, namely a native speaker. This is not possible in the case of most teacher-made tapes, of course, but neither is it necessary for the materials under discussion here. The professionally produced tape programs which often accompany beginning and intermediate textbooks are

based on the tenets of modern aural-oral teaching theories and thus provide for practice and reinforcement of materials first introduced in the classroom. While the goal of that approach is to strengthen certain habits, the intent here is not to provide additional work to the class for practice but to remove work from the classroom which is usually done there. The goal is to provide fresh classroom time which can be put to better use by relegating the more mechanical, routine and even outright drudgery items to the lab, although such activities are necessary also and form a standard part of the normal curriculum. If the teacher is qualified to conduct these activities in class--without being a native speaker--he or she is equally qualified to do the job via tapes. One medium of teaching has been replaced by another; if the taped materials are done cleverly and with a bit of imagination, nothing has been lost but much crucial class time can be gained.

At the same time, teacher-prepared tapes are naturally tailored to their specific classes in a particular school system and are thus much more successful in meeting the goal of providing more individualized instruction than any standardized

tape program could be. In this sense, teachers can be assured that their own tapes are superior. Besides, all tapes they produce are permanently on hand in case they are re-usable for successive generations of students at that level.

There is no doubt that the preparation and the process of taping are time-consuming, but since the same materials as an in-class activity would also have to be prepared, we are in effect dealing with a reasonable additional time expenditure for the teacher. In this connection, it must be emphasized that we must forcefully free ourselves from the old stigma that taping requires intricate knowledge of equipment, familiarity with specialized technique, and expertise in audio materials production in all its aspects. With the experience built up as a result of several attempts at taping, it should become evident very quickly that the taping process can be handled by any of us with considerable dexterity, ease, and speed--it is no more forbidding than using a mimeo spirit master--and that this type of performance does not fundamentally differ from the one expected of us in class. Therefore it is simply no longer tenable to maintain a continuing reluctance toward all matters involving the lab.

This applies particularly to senior staff members who would have that much more to offer in providing educational materials but who deny themselves and their students such advantages. One would particularly welcome a cooperative effort by several teachers in a system to get together from time to time to produce lab materials for their tape library. If the time pressures are absolutely immense, it would even be possible to take over somebody's teaching duties for a few days to permit the creation of some critically needed materials. Ultimately all of the members would benefit from such a ready supply of taped work units. It must be remembered, finally, that such specific materials cannot be supplied commercially since those products can only be envisioned for general consumption, so that there is no advantage in being complacent and waiting for the right kind of materials to come along. Neither can there be any realistic hope that the number of contact hours in foreign language programs will be increased in the way of national policy. The only constructive force to introduce creative new ways for approximating the goal of communicative competence in foreign language education will come out of the initiative of teachers. It is our responsibility to work actively toward that goal.

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